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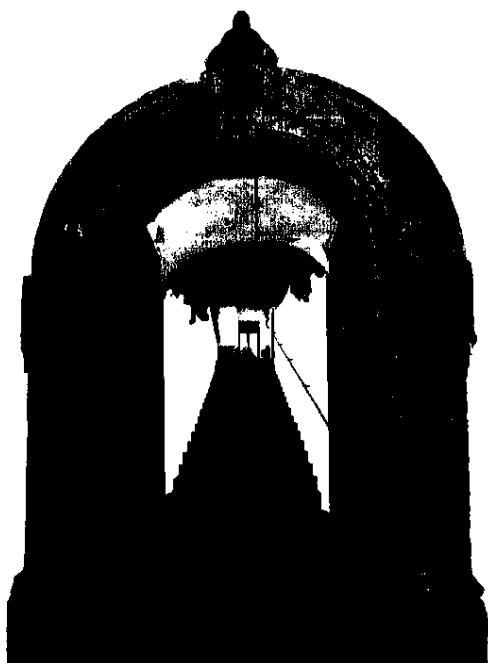
# INTERPRETANDO L'ANTICO

Scritti di archeologia offerti a Maria Bonghi Jovino

Tomo primo

a cura di

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## HUMAN SACRIFICE

### ETRUSCAN RITUALS FOR DEATH AND FOR LIFE

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Human sacrifices existed in every culture in antiquity. We are familiar with those of the Bog People, Aztec sacrifices, the sacrifices carried out by the Druids among the Celts, the *tophets* of the Carthaginians, the sacrifice of Iphigeneia in Greek myth and the Biblical account of the Lord demanding the sacrifice of Isaac. Excavations have uncovered archaeological evidence from a variety of sites that seem to confirm the existence of ritual sacrifices in the ancient world. An impressive confirmation of the existence of such rituals in real life in Etruria was the discovery of a foundation sacrifice in the Civita of Tarquinia.

The last two decades have seen a good deal of discussion about human sacrifice in antiquity, and interest in the subject has recently peaked, with conferences and many published articles, books, and collected works on human sacrifice, so that the bibliography today is very large<sup>1</sup>. Scholars interested in human sacrifice – whether from an anthropological, religious, psychological, historical, literary or iconographical point of view

<sup>1</sup> I have appended a basic bibliography of relevant and recent publications. Martin Bergmann's psychoanalytic study looks at the religious aspect of human sacrifice through history (BERGMANN 1992). L. Steel provides a survey of types of sacrifice in the ancient world, and finds that the practice was not limited to primitive societies (STEEL 1995, pp. 18-27). D. Hughes (1995) surveys the literary and archaeological evidence for human sacrifice in ancient Greece, distinguishes ritual killing or ritual murder from human sacrifice proper, and finds most of the evidence inconclusive for the actual practice. For the Bog People, GLOB 1969; Aztec sacrifices, UMBERGER 2010, pp. 18-25; Celts, GREEN 2001.

– all have generally considered such ritual killing to be a part of a pre-historic past, and a custom whose end marked the progress of civilization. Indeed two great civilizations, the Greeks and the Hebrews, saw the stories of the sacrifices of Isaac and Iphigeneia as the final acts of what used to be, marking their emergence from the darkness of their own barbaric past into civilized societies.

These religious practices can be divided into distinct categories, all of which were intended to bind more closely the community that took part in their performance<sup>2</sup>. They were carried out to appease the gods and avert disasters, or for the dead, as part of the funerary ritual, to honor dead ancestors and satisfy hostile ghosts, and to mark the establishment of a new foundation. Different cultures carried out specific types of rituals: the Carthaginians performed ritual sacrifices of children in times of stress<sup>3</sup>, the Scythians regularly sacrificed the dead king's wives and retainers to provide them with an appropriate retinue<sup>4</sup>.

### *Human Sacrifices, Etruscan and Roman*

Greek and Latin authors record a number of human sacrifices carried out by Etruscans in historical times. It is not easy to classify these. There was a ritual killing at the time of the conquest of Lipari in the early fifth century BC, when the Etruscans killed a high-ranking enemy, apparently as a thank offering to the god Apollo<sup>5</sup>. Two other sacrifices in the form of the slaughter of enemy prisoners were carried out in war time.

Herodotus tells of a sacrifice that took place after the battle of Alalia, around 540 BC, when the men of Caere together with their Carthaginian allies took the Phocaeen prisoners they had captured to the Etruscan coast and stoned them to death<sup>6</sup>. The sacrifice was followed by a plague, which the oracle at Delphi attributed to this crime: the Etruscans had to expiate for their sin by the establishment of funeral games. This could

<sup>2</sup> HUGHES 1991, p. 2; BONNECHÈRE 1998, pp. 191-215.

<sup>3</sup> STEEL 1995, pp. 19-22; BROWN 1991; DAY 1989.

<sup>4</sup> IVANTCHIK 2011. For Thracian human sacrifices, see MARAZOV 2011.

<sup>5</sup> References to this event in Greek literature and Etruscan epigraphy: COLONNA 1984, pp. 557-578. COLONNA 1984, p. 571, notes that the sacrifice implied in Achilles' ambush of Troilus in the Tomba dei Tori was related to Apollo.

<sup>6</sup> HDT. I.167; TORELLI 1981, pp. 1-7.

not have been a thank offering. Why did they really kill the prisoners? Was it to reanimate the souls of their own dead who had fallen in battle? The reference to a funerary ritual provides an Etruscan aspect for the event, which the Greek historian might not have understood<sup>7</sup>. A similar episode occurred in the mid-fourth century, during the course of a war between Tarquinia and the Romans: at that time, Livy tells us, 307 Romans were killed in the forum of Tarquinia<sup>8</sup>.

Scholars have suggested a number of motives for such rites. Sacrifices following a victorious battle were officially a thank offering to the gods, part of the tithe from the booty<sup>9</sup>. On a deeper, psychological level the killing of enemy prisoners could also magically bring about the defeat of the enemy, or at least prevent their return<sup>10</sup>. And the sacrifices could serve as funerary rites, to honor those who had died in battle, and to assure that their ghosts would not return to torment the survivors. It is to be noted that the fourth-century sacrifice at Tarquinia was carried out in a public place, in the forum of the city<sup>11</sup>. The fact that they were public sacrifices in which the community as a whole participated was an important part of the ritual, in both the Etruscan cities and Rome.

Sacrifices took place in Rome, in the Forum Boarium, in 228 BC, 216 BC and 113 BC<sup>12</sup>. The rite of 228 BC followed a consultation of the Sybilline books when a *portentum* was taken to announce the Gallic threat; it involved the burial of two living couples, one of Greeks, one of Gauls<sup>13</sup>. The two later sacrifices that consisted of the burial of Greek and Gallic couples were also called for by the Sybilline books, and involved the crime of *incestum* on the part of Vestal Virgins<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> I owe this observation to Jane Whitehead, whom I thank for her careful reading of the text.

<sup>8</sup> LIV. VII.15.10; TORELLI 1981, pp. 3-7; BONFANTE 1984, p. 536, number of prisoners is to be corrected.

<sup>9</sup> COLONNA 1984, p. 572; BRIQUEL, in this volume.

<sup>10</sup> BERGMANN 1992, pp. 24-25.

<sup>11</sup> TORELLI 1981, pp. 1-7.

<sup>12</sup> FRASCHETTI 1981, pp. 51-115; VÁRHELYI 2007, pp. 277-304; BÉMONT 1960, pp. 133-146.

<sup>13</sup> PLUT. *Marcellus* 3.5-7.

<sup>14</sup> For the sacrifice of 216 BC, see LIV. 22.57, 4 and 6. For 113 BC (or 114 BC), see PLUT. *Roman Questions* 83 (284 B). According to PLINY H.N. 28.12, the custom lasted until his own time: *Boario vero in foro Graecum Graecamque defossos aut aliarum gentium cum quibus tum rem esset etiam nunc nostra aetas vidit.*



Figure 1 – Monteleone Chariot. Apotheosis of Achilles, with Polyxena under the chariot. 550-540 BC. (EMILIOZZI 2011, fig. V.30 on p. 80).

in Etruria, that by the blood of certain living creatures souls become divine and avoid the laws of mortality»<sup>25</sup>.

The many instances of human sacrifice and other scenes of violent death illustrated in Etruscan funerary art lay stress on the blood that flows from the victims' wounds and symbolically provided blood for the dead<sup>26</sup>. They seem at some point to have substituted for actual sacrifices offered to the divinized ancestors, to honor them, and to keep their hostile souls

<sup>25</sup> ARNOB. *Adv. Nat.* 2.62, cited in DE GRUMMOND - SIMON 2006, p. 217 (THULIN, 1.9). *Quod Etruria libris in Acheronticis pollicentur, certorum animalium sanguine numinibus certis dato divinas animas fieri et ab legibus mortalitatis educi*. For the *dii animales*, «gods made from souls», see BRIQUEL 1985, pp. 263-278; JANNOT 2005, pp. 39-40 (human sacrifice), pp. 52-53, 69, 173; PIFFIG 1975, pp. 179, and 111 on human sacrifice.

<sup>26</sup> BONFANTE 1978, pp. 136-148: when I presented the paper and showed a slide of a bloody scene, a member of the audience fainted, proving the powerful effect of the sight of blood. The importance of the blood ritual in Etruscan religion contrasts with a Greek reticence towards blood magic (BURKERT 1985, pp. 59-60), though Greeks on certain occasions also practiced *sphagia*.

or ghosts from returning and harming the living<sup>27</sup>. Such sacrifices carried out as funerary rituals must go back a long way, though we have no way of tracing their existence<sup>28</sup>. Perhaps they ended in the fourth century BC, at the time when more bloody scenes appear in Etruscan funerary art, in wall paintings such as the François Tomb, and in the many scenes of sacrifice on sarcophagi and cinerary urns<sup>29</sup>. Or did they continue even beyond this date? In the fourth century Carthaginian human sacrifices, as shown by their burial places or *tophets*, were actually increasing in number<sup>30</sup>.

### *Foundation Sacrifices*

Etruscan foundation rituals were an Etruscan specialty, acknowledged as such by their neighbors in Italy: *Oppida condebant in Latio etrusco ritu multi...* «Many founded towns in Latium by the Etruscan ritual»<sup>31</sup>.

Maria Bonghi Jovino's excavation of the earliest levels of the Civita of Tarquinia uncovered a skeleton buried in a sacred area in the foundation deposit of the ancient city, in the center of the habitation area. This surprising discovery, dated to the half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, provides for the first time archaeological evidence of an Etruscan ritual involving a human sacrifice made at the time of the foundation of an Etruscan city in order to propitiate the gods and ensure its success.

<sup>27</sup> Most recently, SANNIBALE 2009, pp. 813-824, sees Adonis's wound as symbolically providing blood for the deceased whose ashes are in the Etruscan cinerary urn in the Vatican with the Death of Adonis. See also BURKERT 1985, p. 60: «the downward flowing blood reaches the dead»; UCCHINO 2009, pp. 187-196, especially pp. 189-192; BERGMANN 1992, p. 20, on fear of the dead.

<sup>28</sup> At Tarquinia, the sixth-century modification of the earlier cult area might still have been used for human sacrifice, according to the excavators: LEIGHTON 2004, p. 121, with earlier references. These, however, would not have been funerary sacrifices.

<sup>29</sup> VAN DER MEER 2004; STEUERNAGEL 1998; BURANELLI 1987, pp. 85-89, 102; STEINGRÄBER 1987, 2006, *passim*; BONFANTE - SWADDLING 2006, pp. 55-58.

<sup>30</sup> PLUT. *Moralia* 2.171D, "On Superstition". DAY 1989. There was an increase in the number of human sacrifices in the fourth century: BROWN 1991, pp. 52-53, summarizes the evidence. STEEL 1995, pp. 19-22: «the majority of the evidence comes from Carthage... where this rite persisted until the destruction of the site in 146 BC».

<sup>31</sup> JANNOT 2005, pp. 43-45. DE GRUMMOND and SIMON 2006, for sources: FESTUS, 285, and VARRO, LL.5.143 for quotation.

The man had been ritually killed; he was apparently a stranger rather than an Etruscan<sup>32</sup>. The bones showed that he was a muscular adult male, apparently a sailor or a soldier, who had once suffered wounds from which had recovered, and had survived for several years before the last violent fatal blow to the head.

The community as a whole had participated in this public sacrifice, as shown by the victim's burial in the center of the city<sup>33</sup>. Like the fourth-century sacrifice at Tarquinia, the Roman sacrifices carried out in the Forum Boarium, and perhaps the sacrifice that was to save Rome from the barbarian Alaric, it was a public ritual, intended to bind more closely the community that took part in its performance.<sup>34</sup> The preservation of the sacred cult place in the center of the city perpetuated this tradition.

### *Sacrifices of Prisoners*

The man buried in the foundation level of Tarquinia around 750 BC was a stranger, a soldier or a sailor, probably a prisoner of war. Etruscan soldiers and their aristocratic leaders – wearing the armor that was buried with them in their splendid graves – were at that time successfully defending their shores and boundaries, and no doubt taking prisoners, who were enslaved, sold, executed or sacrificed.

Artistic representations show such bound prisoners in a number of contexts<sup>35</sup>. A Villanovan bronze group from Vetulonia shows a naked, ithyphallic warrior leading a chained naked female before him (Fig. 2)<sup>36</sup>. Most of the prisoners are male, however. The decoration of a seventh-century Etrusco-Corinthian vase includes a striking image of a man lying on a table, his bound

<sup>32</sup> BONGHI JOVINO - MALLEGGI - USAI 1997, pp. 489-497, pls. I-V, provide the anthropological and archaeological details. Buried with the man was a vase of Euboean manufacture. The contemporary burials of infants found nearby might also have been part of the foundation ritual.

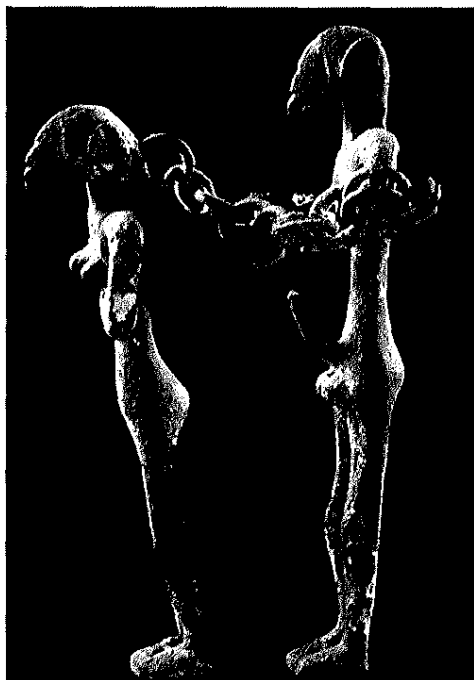
<sup>33</sup> See *Sepolti tra i vivi* 2009.

<sup>34</sup> BURKERT 1985, p. 248: «More important than individual morality is continuity, which depends on solidarity».

<sup>35</sup> STEUERNAGEL 1998, doubts the reality of human sacrifice in Etruria, but accepts the sacrifice of prisoners, pp. 149-165.

<sup>36</sup> Bronze group from Costaccia Bambagini, Vetulonia, ca. 700 BC. In Florence, Museo Archeologico: BARTOLONI 2000, p. 52.

Figure 2 – Bronze group of victorious warrior and chained female prisoner. Early seventh century (BARTOLONI 2000, p. 52).



hands held up as if to ward off the blows (Fig. 3)<sup>37</sup>, and armed, victorious soldiers returning from battle with bound prisoners as their booty appear on the slightly later Benvenuti situla from Este (ca. 600 BC) (Fig. 4)<sup>38</sup>. An image from a *nenfro* relief, a *lastrone a scala* of Tarquinia, shows a man leading before him a naked prisoner with his hands tied behind his back<sup>39</sup>.

Achilles' Sacrifice of the Trojan Prisoners at the grave of Patroclus, mentioned by Homer in only two lines of the *Iliad* and never represented in Greek art, is a popular theme in Etruscan art<sup>40</sup>. The artist of the fourth-

<sup>37</sup> SZILÁGYI 1992, fig. 3: the large feline with owl-like face standing near him does not seem to belong to the same scene.

<sup>38</sup> FREY - LUCKE 1962, cat. 7, pl. 65.

<sup>39</sup> BRUNI 1986, tav. XX.

<sup>40</sup> Above, note 29. LOWENSTAM 2008, pp. 157-165; BURANELLI 1987, pp. 85-89 (Trojan Prisoners), p. 102 (Cassandra); STEINGRÄBER 1987, p. 178, IDEM 2006; STEUERNAGEL 1998, pp. 19-28; MASSA PAIRAULT 2003, pp. 186-199.



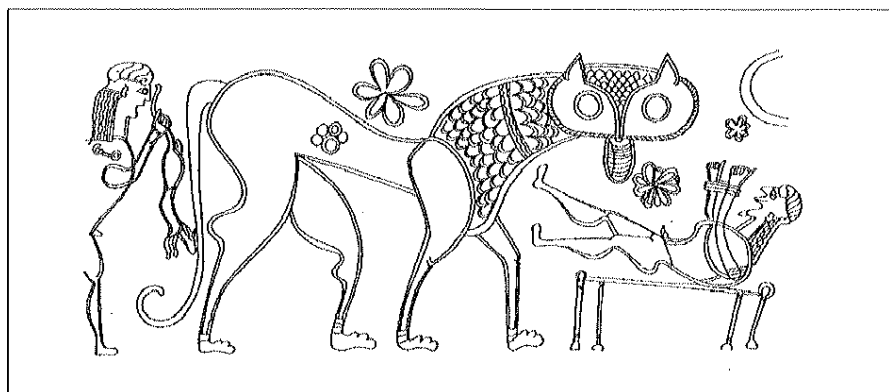


Figure 3 – Etrusco-Corinthian vase with chained prisoner. 630-590 BC (SZILÁGYI 1992, fig. 3).

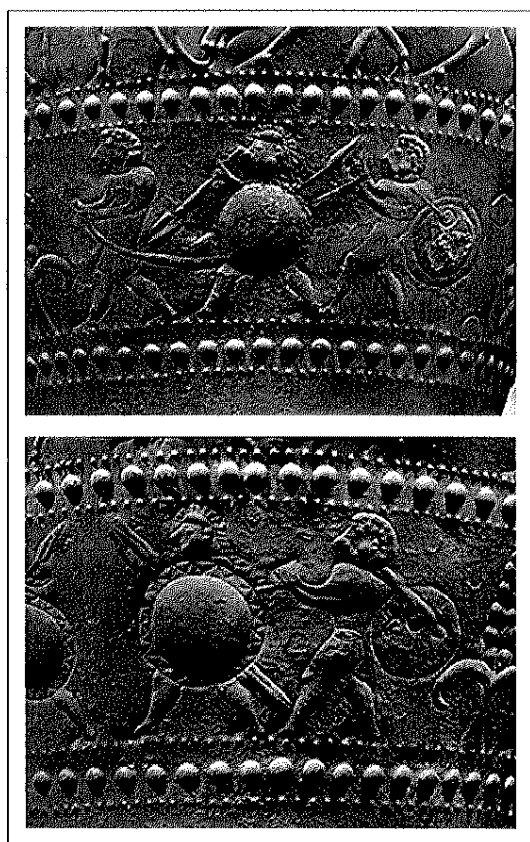


Figure 4 – Benvenuti situla. Victorious warrior returning with bound prisoners. Ca. 600 BC (FREY - LUCKE 1962, cat. 7, pl. 65).

century painting of the *Sacrifice of the Trojan Prisoners* in the François Tomb focuses on the contrast between two bound prisoners, one being brought to Achilles, his legs bleeding so that he will not run away, and another prisoner around the corner, in the scene of the Vulci heroes, Caile Vipinas (Caelius Vibenna), being freed from his bonds by Macstrna (Mastarna)<sup>41</sup>. The blood pouring from the prisoner whose throat is being slit by Achilles and from the bleeding legs of the prisoner being led to sacrifice by Ajax was intended to provide blood for the deceased ancestors of the great family of Vulci buried in the François Tomb; for, as we have seen, the Etruscans believed that blood could give life to the dead<sup>42</sup>.

Images of prisoners of war like the Trojan prisoners in the painting are significant in the context of human sacrifice and its place in the funeral rites of the Etruscans; they were the victims of choice. On some later Hellenistic urns from Chiusi, prisoners are shown standing before the door of the underworld that their blood will open for the deceased. Pictured on one terracotta urn is a nude prisoner, with his hands tied behind his back, standing in front of an arched door; nearby, another man dressed in a short tunic holds the rope to which he is tied (Fig. 5)<sup>43</sup>. Clearly, the prisoner is about to be offered as a sacrifice to the dead, a sacrifice that is by now symbolic, but that once was very real.

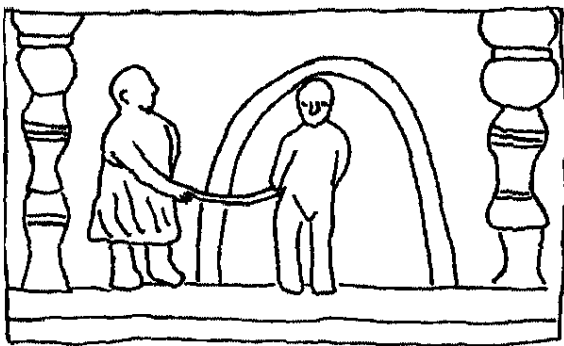


Figure 5 – Urn from Chiusi. Bound prisoner before door to the underworld. Hellenistic. (SCHEFFER 1994, fig. 18.10).

<sup>41</sup> CIE 5266-5275. BONFANTE - BONFANTE 2002, pp. 169-175. Source 54. Francesco de Angelis, personal communication.

<sup>42</sup> So too Odysseus provided black blood so the ghost of Teiresias could speak (*Odyssey*, 11.30-99).

<sup>43</sup> SCHEFFER 1994, pp. 203-204.

### Conclusion

There is enough historical, archaeological and iconographic evidence to show that human sacrifice, which we generally consider to belong to a prehistoric past, was carried out in civilized places in historic times. In antiquity it seems to have been practiced at Carthage as a new or renewed practice until 146 BC; it existed at Rome in the third and second centuries BC and was only officially banned in 97 BC; and in Etruria it was practiced at least until it was substituted by symbolic artistic representations, or by bloody games like the one pictured in the Tomba degli Auguri<sup>44</sup>. The foundation ritual in the Civita of Tarquinia brings rare and precious archaeological evidence of early Etruscan history, and of the religious rituals that were carried out by the community at such occasions as foundations and funerals in accordance with the rituals of the *Etrusca disciplina*.

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<sup>44</sup> STEINGRÄBER 1987, n. 42, pl. 20.

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